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ABSTRACT

Organized as a question-and-answer booklet, this parents' guide explains scores on standardized reading achievement tests. Examples illustrate the meaning of certain grade equivalent scores. The grade equivalent method is described as a poor way to report scores: raw scores, percentiles, and stanine ranges are discussed as alternatives. The analysis of raw score data to create a norm-referenced test is explained, and it is stressed that approximately half of the students tested always score below their grade level. Tests are characterized as devices used to rank children, teachers, and schools: if tests are used to determine eligibility for high school graduation, a certain percentage of students will never pass the requirement. It is recommended that parents understand the consequences of their children's test results. It is also stated that there is no sense keeping a child who is not reading at grade level from advancing to the next grade, because half of the children tested did not score at grade level. Demands which parents might make to school officials include insisting that grade equivalents be abolished: scores be recorded as a reflection of group comparisons: and tests and testing be stripped of their mystery. (GDC)

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STANDARDIZED READING TESTS

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Reading Tests:

WHAT DOES THAT SCORE MEAN

TM 800100

LOOK INSIDE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR CHILD AND STANDARDIZED TESTS

PEANUTS/by Charles M. Schulz

. . . half the students in the country ALWAYS score below grade level on reading tests and half score on or above?

. . . a student's grade equivalent test score can change by as much as a year if the child is retested a month or so later?

. . . good readers sometimes score much lower than clearly poorer readers?

. . . some children who cannot read at all can score on a 4th grade reading level?

. . . schools often spend piles of money coaching for standardized tests though test makers declare the tests coach-proof?

. . . in some schools children are told NEVER TO GUESS on standardized tests; in other schools children are told, when in doubt, "GUESS."

. . . many reading programs claim success in raising reading scores year after year yet the students in these programs continue to read poorly.

Confused?
Dismayed?
Furious?

So are many other parents and they ask questions.

Parent: My daughter is in the sixth grade. She scored 6.7 on the reading test this year. What does that mean?

Answer: It means that your daughter got a certain number of answers right on the day she took **that** test. She got the same number of correct answers as about half the children who took the test. The 6 stands for the 6th grade and the 7 stands for the seventh month of the school year (September is one, October, two, etc.)

Parent: My son is in the same sixth grade class. He scored 4.2 What does that mean?

Answer: It means that on the day **he** took the test, his score was below the average for sixth graders across the country who took the test.

Parent: Does that mean he reads like a fourth grader would in October? (the 2nd month of 4th grade.)

Answer: Not necessarily. There is no established link between a 4.2 grade level equivalency in reading and the fourth grade. As a matter of fact, the test your son took has probably NEVER been given to fourth graders.

Parent: My sixth grade son got a score of 8.0. What does that mean?

Answer: Some people think it means your son is reading like an 8th grader. But all we can really say is that on the day of the test, his score was above the average for sixth graders in the country.

Parent: How would he do on a reading test given to eighth graders?

Answer: No way to know. The tests are different and GRADE LEVEL EQUIVALENCY SCORES DO NOT ACTUALLY CORRESPOND TO SCHOOL GRADE.

Parent: My sixth grade daughter scored 9.2 last year and 8.8 this year. Is she reading worse than she used to?

Answer: Not at all. The test she took this year is different from the one she took last year. There is no valid way to compare scores on dissimilar tests. It's an apples and oranges comparison.

Parent: I'm really confused now. I thought a grade equivalent (G.E.) score told me how well my child was reading.

Answer: So do a lot of parents and, by the way, teachers and school administrators, too. The grade equivalent (GE) is merely one of a number of ways to report standardized test scores and a very poor one as you can see.

Parent: What else could be used?

Answer: You could be given the RAW SCORE. That is, the number of correct answers on a test.

"Mark's **raw score** is 56."

You could be given PERCENTILE data.

"Mark is reading in the **60th percentile** (%ile)."

That means Mark did better than 60% of the children who took this test.

Parent: If my child jumped 3 years on the test can't I, at least, assume that she has made a lot of progress?

Answer: Maybe. But as you can see from the chart on the following page, taken from one of the most respected tests used around the country, a child could have gone from 4.5 to 8.4 simply by getting 4 more answers correct. And even more frustrating for some children is that they might look like much poorer readers than they are because they were unlucky guessers and got 3 more items wrong.

Test 1: Word Knowledge		Test 2: Reading		Total Reading		Total Reading (continued)	
Raw Score	Grade Equiv.	Raw Score	Grade Equiv.	Raw Score	Grade Equiv.	Raw Score	Grade Equiv.
		44	6.9	44	2.4		
		43	5.4	43	2.4		
		42	4.4	42	2.3		
		41	3.8	41	2.3		
40	7.3	40	3.5	40	2.3	84	8.4
39	5.2	39	3.3	39	2.3	83	6.9
38	4.1	38	3.2	38	2.3	82	6.0
37	3.7	37	3.0	37	2.3	81	5.2
36	3.5	36	2.9	36	2.3	80	4.5
35	3.4	35	2.8	35	2.2	79	4.3
34	3.2	34	2.8	34	2.2	78	3.9
33	3.1	33	2.7	33	2.1	77	3.7
32	3.0	32	2.7	32	2.1	76	3.6
31	2.9	31	2.7	31	2.1	75	3.5

Parent: Are there any other ways to report scores besides grade equivalents, raw scores or percentiles?

Answer: Yes. The least misleading method is called STANINES. All the reported scores are spread across nine groupings or STANINES. THE first stanine includes the lowest score, the ninth, the highest scores and the fifth — the middle stanine — is considered 'average.' For example, on one test with 80 items, children who got between 37 and 46 correct answers are reported as being within the 'fifth stanine.'

Stanines include a **range** of scores. If we use stanines we can avoid pretending that a single precise score can be established for a child. As a matter of fact, most test makers advise schools to use stanines and **not** grade equivalents. Henry Dyer, a highly respected authority on testing, goes further. He calls grade-level equivalency scores "absurd, wrong and misleading . . . statistical monstrosities."

One of the worst things about GE scores is that they pretend to be precise and accurate. No one is told about the test's MEASUREMENT ERROR. You should know that all standardized tests have a large built-in margin of error and had your child ---

- taken this test some other day
- made luckier guesses
- taken another form of the test

the final score could be very different. By how much? You'd have to know the measurement error which will often be a year (or 10%) off the score given.

Parent: Why do test makers continue to report grade equivalents if they admit they aren't accurate?

Answer: Your question is a good one. Test makers claim they are just giving their customers — the schools — what they ask for. The school system says it needs grade equivalent scores because it is the method that best meets the demands of the public and of state and federal funding sources.

Parent: How do they arrive at these GE numbers?

Answer: Here's how it works. You are a test maker and you are going to develop a standardized reading test for sixth graders. One April, you try it out on a sample population. You collect the RAW SCORES — the number of right answers — and list them from lowest to highest. If, for example, your list looked like this -

21 25 34 39 40 44 48 49 54 57 64

RAW SCORE 44 would fall smack in the middle. That is what the test maker will call the norm for 6th graders taking this test in April. It is the middle score obtained by a sample population. Thus, children who are given the test subsequently and who get a RAW SCORE of 44 are said to be reading 6.7 GE. 6.7 is called the "norm" for this test.

Parent: That's it?

Answer: Basically yes. Children who get 44 or more answers right are said to be on or above grade level. Children whose RAW SCORE is below 44 are said to be below grade level. There are statistical complexities that squeeze all the scores into a pattern called the normal curve, but in a nutshell, that's it.

Parent: Can't schools improve their teaching methods so that all the children would read on or above grade level?

Answer: According to the test makers, that can never happen with their tests. The test makers guarantee that almost half of **all** children who take the test will always be below grade level.

Good Pupils Fail Florida Test

Preschool Pupils
Cheat on Tests
To Avoid Tuitio

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boss issues
hard line
on readi

Chicago Schools
To Bar Advance
Poor Readers

Leader of Principals' Group Terms
New York Reading Test 'Travesty'

The reading test farce

Parent: That doesn't make any sense.

Answer: It doesn't seem to, but you must understand the purpose of this kind of test. Since the test makers have guaranteed how the scores will come out, the results are tailormade for ranking. Children, teachers, and even whole schools are ranked on test results. The director of the New York City Board of Education's Office of Educational Evaluation was recently quoted in the New York Times: "(But) the objective of the citywide test is not instructional; the objective is the issuance of a school-by-school ranking report."

Parent: I still don't see why most of the children can't get most of the answers correct. Isn't this possible if the children work hard and learn.

Answer: No, absolutely not. It's not at all like the driving tests. With good teaching and sufficient practice, almost anyone can pass the driving test and get a license.

If, however, the written test included multiple choice questions about chassis engineering and aerodynamic principles, many competent drivers would fail. Standardized tests are specifically de-

signed to include items that many children in a given grade will **not** be able to answer. Could you answer questions about chassis engineering? Probably not. But items like that are necessary if we want a ranking order, and that is what standardized reading tests are all about.

Parent: What about setting some standard for high school graduation? Shouldn't we require a 12th grade reading level for a high school diploma?

Answer: Only if we recognize that by doing so, we have also decided to graduate only 50% of our high school seniors.

Parent: Well, what about saying that graduating seniors should have to test on at least an 11th grade level.

Answer: That's simply another way of saying that 40% of all high school seniors cannot graduate. If we decided to use 9th grade, we would not graduate 20% of the students. Using grade equivalencies will always mean someone is determining before hand exactly how many students should be allowed to graduate.

Parent: If that's the case, some children are always going to be below so-called grade level.

Answer: Exactly.

It's like baseball. Not all teams have a winning season. Some teams must win more than they lose and others must lose more than they win. For every win there is a loss. It would be foolish to expect all the teams in the American League to be in the top half of the League or to be playing better than .500 ball. Imagine a sports writer stating: "It's time to upgrade baseball. Why shouldn't all the teams have a winning record?" Sounds ridiculous, right? Why then, do educators and politicians keep calling for all children to have a winning "record," for all children to score on GRADE LEVEL? That is equally ridiculous because THE SCORING SYSTEM IS RIGGED AGAINST THAT POSSIBILITY.

Parent: Okay. I'm convinced that my child's test score in not what I thought it was. What can I ask my child's teacher about the test score that **will** be useful to me?

Answer: You should insist on getting all the information the school

has about your child's test results. Ask for the raw score, the percentile and the stanine. Don't settle for the grade equivalent.

Find out what consequences the test result has for your child. For example, will the test score deny your child entry to programs that he or she might succeed in. Your child's educational opportunities should not be decided on the basis of mere chance and that is exactly what happens if the grade equivalent score is accepted as an exact measure.

Parent: Then it doesn't make much sense to "fail" (hold over) a child who is not reading on grade level.

Answer: No, it doesn't unless you decide to hold over half the children in the country every year.

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Parent: If the test score is so inaccurate, is there any way to find out how well my child is reading.

Answer: There are many ways. Some are far simpler and more accurate than the test described here, and you can find out about them in the booklet: **Standardized Reading — What are the Alternatives?**

Parent: Is there anything parents like me can do to change the present situation?

Answer: Indeed there is. There are at least five demands that might be made to school officials.

1. You should insist that school authorities provide parents with the kind of information we've given you in this booklet. Ask hard questions because many teachers, school administrators and school boards do not themselves understand the scoring system.
2. You should demand an immediate end to the grade equivalency farce. Grade equivalents are educationally inaccurate and misleading to child and parent alike. No test report which is unfair to children should be tolerated.

3. You should insist that test scores be reported with scrupulous accuracy. Reports of scores obtained on standardized reading tests should **never** be used to report an **individual child's** achievement in reading. Be sure that everyone understands that standardized reading tests are meant to compare **groups**. When such tests are given, be sure that the result is not recorded on your child's record as if it reflected your child's **individual** reading achievement.

4. You should insist that schools get to work on developing fair and accurate ways to tell you how your individual child reads. Whatever the method, it should make sense to you and should report your child's progress accurately.

5. Above all, **insist** that tests and testing be stripped of their mystery. Insist on open discussion about testing. Be wary of brush-offs that make you feel that testing is too tricky for parents to understand. Your child's educational success depends on the best possible collaboration between school and parent. **Insist on it.**

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Additional Copies of this booklet:
Standardized Reading Tests: What Does That Score Mean
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Other booklets available (or scheduled for publication) are:
Standardized Reading Tests:

- **Do They Help or Hurt Your Child**
- **How To Prepare Your Child**
- **Their Impact on Curriculum: Do We Test What's Taught or Teach What's Tested**
- **What Are The Alternatives**

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